Medicine in Perspective

'I and My Sciatica'

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Herman Melville (1819 to 1891) after early success was nearly forgotten and little appreciated in his lifetime, yet his works have received new interest in the past half century. He wrote eight novels—the most famous, his masterpiece *Moby Dick* (1851)—several volumes of poetry and a collection of short stories. The novella *Billy Budd* was published 30 years after his death.

The Melville family lived in Albany, New York. After his father died when Melville was 12 years old, the family was in severe financial need; Melville worked at several jobs without much success. At age 19, he signed on as a common sailor aboard a cargo ship bound for Liverpool and back; he later made several whaling voyages. The experiences of his sailing days were used in his novels when he began his writing career in 1844 at age 25.

Melville was a vigorous and robust young man in whom back pain later developed. He mentions back pain, rheumatics and sciatica in his early works and may have had some trouble with his back before the first of many disabling bouts of back pain.

After quitting the sea and marrying in 1847, he moved to New York City where he set up housekeeping with his wife, his brother who was also newly married, his mother and his four sisters. He established a strict schedule of writing that kept him at his desk from 8:30 in the morning to 4:00 in the afternoon. He wrote his first six books between 1844 and 1851. Only the first two books, *Typee* and *Omoo,* were popular successes. Even *Moby Dick,* the sixth book, was not well received.

In *Mardi* (1849), his third book, Melville describes courtiers required to kneel before the throne who complain "our knee pans are stiff with sciatics" and their joints make "that strange crackling and firing off of bone balls and sockets, ever incident to the genuflections of rheumatic courtiers." A stone image of a god "looked as if sore harassed with sciatics and lumbagoes." At a burial place, the travelers were told, "old men zealously donning their raiment immediately after immersion [in consecrated waters] became afflicted with rheumatics; and instances were related of their falling down dead, in this their pursuit of longevity." He described a writer whose "rigidity of style" was due to writing while sitting on a straight-backed bench "when ill of a lumbago, and a crick in the neck."

In *White Jacket* (1850), the narrator was refused permission to waterproof his jacket by a navy lieutenant and blames him for all his soakings and drenchings: ". . . every twinge of rheumatism, which I still occasionally feel, is directly referable to him."

In *Moby Dick* (1851), the carpenter criticizes the artificial legs made ashore: "Those buckskin legs . . . soak water, they do; and of course get rheumatic, and have to be doctored with washes and lotions, just like live legs."

In *Pierre* (1852), the narrator has "some inklings of what it might be, to be old, and poor, and worn, and rheumatic, with shivering death drawing nigh, and present life but a dull and a chill!" He says writers become reckless about their health, remain at their desks—"victims to headache, and pain in the back."

In *Bartley, the Scrivener* (1853), one of the law copyists constantly adjusts his desk to alleviate the ache in his back. "If for the sake of easing his back, he brought the table-lid at a sharp angle well up toward his chin, and wrote there like a man using the steep roof of a Dutch house for his desk, then he declared that it stopped the circulation in his arms. If now he lowered the table to his waistbands, and stooped over it in writing, then there was a sore aching in his back."

In the short story "Cock-A-Doodle-Do" (1853): "Ah! there's that twinge of the rheumatics in my right shoulder. I got it one night on the North River, when, in a crowded boat, I gave up my berth to a sick lady, and stayed on deck till morning in drizzling weather. There's the thanks one gets for charity! Twinge! Shoot away, ye rheumatics! Ye couldn't lay on worse if I were some villain who had murdered the lady instead of befriending her."

In *The Confidence Man* (1857), the narrator discusses Polonius (of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*) who had a stroke and became a "fly-blown old fop": "His vile wisdom is made the viler by his viler rheumatism." He describes a kind of "invalid Titan in homespun": "Why, there is no telling, but the stranger was bowed over, and might have seemed bowing for the purpose of picking up something, were it not that, as arrested in the imperfect posture, he for the moment so remained; slanting his tall stature like a mainmast yielding to the gale, or Adam to the thunder"—a posture suggesting ankylosing spondylitis.

The Melvilles moved to a farm near Pittsfield, Massachusetts, in 1850. In February 1855, according to his wife's memoir, "he had his first attack of severe rheumatism in his back—so that he was helpless." In June 1855, he experienced a severe attack of sciatica and was again incapacitated. The

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family was also concerned about his mental state, especially after *Pierre*, which had offended nearly everyone who read it and proved a critical and financial disaster. The family called their neighbor, Oliver Wendell Homes, who was Professor of Anatomy and Dean of Harvard Medical School, to examine Melville especially about his sanity. Melville had criticized and satirized medicine and doctors in his books; he appeared to have no better regard for Holmes. During the months he was limited by back pain and sciatica, Melville wrote the most genial and intimately personal of his magazine pieces, published in *Putnam's Magazine* in March 1856 and entitled "I and My Chimney," which made literary capital of his predicament.[1] Melville's writings are often allusive and allegorical with many classical and philosophical references. The busybody wife of the story represents his mother who lived with him and constantly made suggestions on rearranging the house. Mr Hiram Scribe is Doctor Holmes.

The story begins, "I and my chimney, two gray-headed old smokers, reside in the country. We are, I may say, old settlers here; particularly my old chimney, which settles more and more every day." The chimney is 12 ft square at the base and 4 ft square at its top, with dual fireplaces connecting the double houses on either side of it. The chimney dominates everything in view, except the "Greak Oak" and "Ogg Mountain," including the narrator; the chimney is the true host of the house. The huge bricks (or vertebrae) of the chimney are no longer used in the building of fireplaces. Because the old roof leaked around it, the chimney had been razeed by a former owner, removing some 15 ft of its top—"a regicidal act of beheading his royal old chimney." The "surgical operation" brought into open air bricks not made of weather-brick, and soon the chimney showed "blotchy symptoms akin to the measles" and began to decay "like a wax nose," requiring another surgical operation: "Unfortunately for the expression—being put on by a squint-eyed mason who, at the same time, had a bad stitch in the side—the new nose stands a little awry, in the same direction."

He occasionally goes down into his cellar to survey the vast square of masonry and wonders at it. "It has a druidical look, away down in the umbrageous cellar there, whose numerous vaulted passages and far glens of gloom, resemble the dark, damp depths of primeval woods." His neighbor chides him for digging around the base of the chimney:

"Ah, loosening the soil, to make it grow. Your chimney, sir, you regard as too small, I suppose; needing further development, especially at the top?"

"Sir!" said I, throwing down the spade, "do not be personal. I and my chimney . . ."

"Personal?"

"Sir, I look upon this chimney less as a pile of masonry than as a personage. It is the king of the house. I am but a suffered and inferior subject."

He keeps his wines in a small closet in the chimney: "Better for wines is it than voyages to the Indias; my chimney itself a tropic. A chair by my chimney in a November day is as good for an invalid as a long season in Cuba. . . . Ah, a warm heart has my chimney."

His wife dislikes the chimney because it blocks her parlor and she envisions a great hall connecting the two houses. Though nearly as old as himself, she has the spirit of his "young sorrel mare. . . . Though she comes from a rheumatic family, she is as straight as a pine, never has any aches; while for me with the sciatica, I am sometimes as crippled up as any old apple tree." He reflects that his wife would have made the perfect match for Peter the Great or Peter Piper: "How she would have set in order that huge littered empire of the one, and with indefatigable pains-taking picked the peck of pickled peppers for the other." He is satisfied with the way things are, and his wife must have all things new: "Old myself, I take to oldness in things; for that cause mainly loving old Montaigne, and old cheese, and old wine; . . . and very fond of my old claw-footed old chair, and old club-footed Deacon White, my neighbor." Yet his wife has a spite against all these things and, especially, "above all, high above all, would fain persecute, unto death, my high-manteled old chimney."

At last, his wife proposes to abolish the chimney. " 'What!' said I, 'abolish the chimney? To take out the backbone of anything, wife, is a hazardous affair. Spines out of backs, and chimneys, out of houses, are not to be taken like frosted lead-pipes from the ground. Besides,' added I, 'the chimney is the one grand permanence of this abode. If undisturbed by innovators, then in future ages, when all the house shall have crumbled from it, this chimney will still survive—a Bunker Hill Monument. No, no, wife, I can't abolish my back-bone.' "

His wife persuades him to allow a master-mason, "a rough sort of architect," to give a preliminary consideration—Mr Hiram Scribe (Doctor Holmes). He takes Scribe on a tour of the chimney, starting in the basement (his low back):

We seemed in the pyramids; and I, with one hand holding my lamp overhead, and with the other pointing out, in the obscurity, the hoar mass of the chimney, seemed some Arab guide, showing the cob-webbed mausoleum of the great god Apis.

"This is a most remarkable structure, sir," said the master-mason, after long contemplating it in silence, "a most remarkable structure, sir."

"Yes," said I, complacently, "every one says so."

"But large as it appears above the roof, I would not have inferred the magnitude of this foundation, sir," eying it critically.

Then taking out his rule, he measured it . . .

To be brief, after no small ciphering, Mr Scribe informed me that my chimney contained, I am ashamed to say how many thousand and odd valuable bricks . . .

"Well, sir," said he, a sort of feeling his way, and, to help himself, fumbling with his hat, "well, sir, I think it can be done."

"What, pray, Mr Scribe; *what* can be done?"

"Your chimney, sir; it can without rashness be removed, I think."

"I will think of it, too, Mr Scribe," said I, turning the knob, and bowing him towards the open space without, "I will *think* of it, sir; it demands consideration; much obliged to ye; good morning, Mr Scribe."

His wife and daughters are delighted that Scribe can remove the chimney and demand to know when the removal will start, but his opposition to the idea returns. His wife declares that as long as the chimney stands, it is a monument to his broken pledge and either she or the chimney should go:

Finding matters coming to such a pass, I and my pipe philosophized over them awhile, and finally concluded between us, that little as our hearts went with the plan, yet for peace's sake, I might write out the chimney's death warrant, and, while my hand was in, scratch a note to Mr Scribe. . . .

To my note, Mr Scribe replied in person.

Once more we made a survey, mainly now with a view to a pecuniary estimate.

"I will do it for five hundred dollars," said Mr Scribe at last, again hat in hand.

"Very well, Mr Scribe, I will think of it," replied I, again bowing him to the door.

Not unvexed by this, for the second time, unexpected response, again he withdrew, and from my wife and daughters again burst the old exclamations.

The truth is, resolve how I would, at the last pinch I and my chimney could not be parted.

For a time, his wife did not disturb him, but he suspected she was collaborating in secret with Scribe:

At last, smoking my pipe one morning, I heard a rap at the door, and my wife, with an air unusually quiet for her, brought me a note. As I have no correspondents except Solomon, with who, in his sentiments, at least, I entirely correspond, the note occasioned me some little surprise, which was not diminished upon reading the following:

". . . It is my solemn duty to warn you, sir, that there is architectural cause to conjecture that somewhere concealed in your chimney is a reserved space, hermetically closed, in short, a secret chamber, or rather closet. How long it has been there, it is for me impossible to say. What it contains is hid, with itself, in darkness. But probably a secret closet would not have been contrived except for some extraordinary object, whether for the concealment of treasure, or what other purpose, may be left to those better acquainted with the history of the house to guess . . ."

This undoubtedly refers to the secret chamber of Melville's state of mind or sanity.

His wife and daughters were elated and renewed their persistent demands to remove the chimney:

That my wife wished to get rid of the chimney, it needed no reflection to show; and that Mr Scribe, for all his pretended disinterestedness, was not opposed to pocketing five hundred dollars by the operation, seemed equally evident. That my wife had, in secret, laid heads together with Mr Scribe, I at present refrain from affirming. But when I consider her enmity against my chimney, and the steadiness with which at the last she is wont to carry out her schemes, if by hook or by crook she can, especially after having been once baffled, why, I scarcely knew at what step of hers to be surprised.

Of one thing only was I resolved, that I and my chimney should not budge.

He writes to Scribe:

Chimney Side, April 2.

Mr Scribe.

Sir:—For your conjecture, we return you our joint thanks and compliments, and beg leave to assure you, that

We shall remain
Very faithfully,
The same,
I and my Chimney.

His wife indignantly insists Scribe can find the secret closet, Melville bets he cannot (doubting Scribe's calculations and his "science").

"Agreed, wife," returned I, knocking my pipe-bowl against the jamb, "and now, to-morrow, I will a third time send for Mr Scribe. Wife, the sciatica takes me; be so good as to put this pipe on the mantel."

Scribe returns; the narrator asks him to verify the exact location of the secret closet. Scribe repeats his survey and finds a discrepancy in his calculations. The narrator demands to know the exact location of the closet and points out to Scribe a number of exceptions to Scribe's calculations. Scribe has been embarrassed and his "science" has failed him. He decides to buy up the decision of Scribe (and his ethics):

"Sir," said I, "really I am much obliged to you for this survey. It has quite set my mind at rest. And no doubt you, too, Mr Scribe, must feel much relieved. Sir," I added, "you have made three visits to the chimney. With a business man, time is money. Here are fifty dollars, Mr Scribe. Nay, take it. You have earned it. Your opinion is worth it. And by the way," as he modestly received the money—"have you any objections to give me a—a—little certificate—something, say, like a steam-boat certificate, certifying that you, a competent surveyor, have surveyed my chimney, and found no reason to believe any unsoundness; in short, any—any secret closet in it. Would you be so kind Mr Scribe?"

He framed the certificate and hung it on the chimney to forever put to rest the stratagems of his wife:

But, no. Inveterately bent upon the extirpation of that noble old chimney, still to this day my wife goes about it, with my daughter Anna's geological hammer, tapping the wall all over, and then holding her ear against it, as I have seen the physicians of life insurance companies tap a man's chest, and then incline over for the echo. Sometimes of nights she almost frightens one, going about on this phantom errand, and still following the sepulchral response of the chimney, round and round, as if it were leading her to the threshold of the secret closet. . . .

The truth is, my wife, like all the rest of the world, cares not a fig for my philosophical jabber. In dearth of other philosophical companionship, I and my chimney have to smoke and philosophize together. And sitting up so late as we do at it, a mighty smoke it is that we two smoky old philosophers make. . . . Scarce a day I do not find her with her tape-measure, measuring, for her grand hall, while Anna holds a yard-stick on one side, and Julia looks approvingly on from the other. . . . Anonymous letters arrive, threatening me with I know not what, unless I remove my chimney. Is it my wife, too, or who, that sets up the neighbors to badgering me on the same subject, and hinting to me that my chimney, like a huge elm, absorbs all moisture from my garden? At night, also, my wife will start as from sleep, professing to hear ghostly noises from the secret closet. Assailed on all sides, and in all ways, small peace have I and my chimney.

He finds a drawer full of plans and estimates for the removal of the chimney, and once came home to find his wife in counsel with an "architectural reformer" about his chimney. Another time, he was nearly struck by bricks (literary critics—and many there were) thrown down from the top of the chimney by workmen in the process of its removal:

Aye, indeed, thinking of those three brickbats, I and my chimney have had narrow escapes.

It is now some seven years since I have stirred from home. My city friends all wonder why I don't come to see them, as in former times. They think I am getting sour and unsocial. Some say that I have become a sort of mossy old misanthrope, while all the fact is, I am simply standing guard over my mossy old chimney; for it is resolved between me and my chimney, that I and my chimney will never surrender.

Holmes's was one of several medical opinions sought by the family. Lemuel Shaw, Melville's father-in-law who was the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Massachusetts, and Melville's wife were very concerned about Melville's health and sanity. The doctors concluded he was not insane and was in command of his mental faculties, although Melville thought himself "slightly insane." A farmer with a bad back, Melville became irritable and moody; he sold half of the farm in 1856 to lessen his burden. Unable to do much work, he was sent on a trip to Europe "for his health" in October 1856. He frequently complained of pain and soreness of his eyes, these being "tender as pidgeon's eggs."

In April 1858, aged 39, he experienced another severe crick in the back and, according to his wife, never regained his former strength. The disabling back pain returned again in the fall of 1858. Melville was so limited by the back ailment that he gave up the farm in December 1861 and moved to New York City where he lived the rest of his life. Soon after arriving in New York, he was "ill with rheumatism" for over a month.

Melville had an attack of "erysipelas" in the spring of 1878 that prevented him from using his hands for several months. He was limited for a time in 1884 with "a kind of rheumatic gout" and that year was unable to write for several months because of another severe attack of "erysipelas." A respiratory tract infection developed in December 1890, later diagnosed as "heart enlargement," and he died September 28, 1891, of "cardiac dilation, mitral regurgitation."

After the early success of his sea stories and tales of adventures among the cannibals, Melville's later writings were so strange and bizarre that he lost his following. Not until 1920 was his genius recognized when renewed interest developed in the works of one of America's most important authors. He expressed a disdain for the rheumatics, castigated himself for having the disorder and blamed others for his twinges. His back did not trouble him as much in his later years. Melville included much of this experience in his works and the back pain that plagued him for so long played a role in many of his stories, especially "I and My Chimney."

REFERENCE

1. Selected Writings of Herman Melville. New York, The Modern Library, 1952, pp 373-408